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IMAGING SYSTEM WITH BUILT-IN DIAGNOSTICS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

5 The present invention relates to the field of image sensors and imaging systems.

Description of the Related Art

 An integrated image sensor is used to convert light impinging on the sensor into electrical signals. An image sensor typically includes one or more (e.g., an array of) photoelements such as
10 photodiodes, phototransistors, or other types of photodetectors, where electrical signals are generated via the well-known photoelectric effect. These signals may then be used, for example, to provide information about light intensity, color, or the optical image focused on the sensor. One common type of image sensor is a CMOS image sensor.

 Fig. 1 shows a schematic top view of a CMOS image sensor **100** implemented in a single
15 integrated circuit or chip. Sensor **100** comprises a photoelement array **102**, a decoding/buffer area **104**, and control, processing, and input/output (I/O) circuitry **106**. Photoelement array **102** comprises an array of photoelements and associated circuitry such as switches and amplifiers. Each photoelement and its associated circuitry are collectively referred to as a pixel. Image sensors, such as sensor **100**, may be used in imaging systems, such as digital cameras.

20 Testing and manufacturing yield can have a substantial influence on the ultimate cost of a chip. Testing is done to detect circuit defects to prevent customer returns. Ideally, the defects are detected early in the manufacturing process to avoid unnecessary fabrication costs for defective chips. Often, such testing is carried out using high-speed testing systems on the bare die on a wafer before the circuit is packaged.

25 Fig. 2 shows a schematic block diagram of a typical testing system **200** that can be used for testing image sensors, such as sensor **100** of Fig. 1, prior to packaging. Testing system **200** comprises a testing platform **202**, a controller **204**, a power supply **206**, and a stimuli generator **208**. The device under test (DUT), in this particular case, unpackaged image sensor wafer **100**, is mounted on platform **202**, which comprises control and support circuitry **210** and an interface **212**. Controller
30 **204** is a software-driven device that controls platform **202**, supply **206**, and generator **208**. Generator **208** is a calibrated light source that provides optical input for sensor **100** when instructed to by controller **204**. Controller **204** performs a specific test function on sensor **100** using interface **212** and circuitry **210**. The overall test procedure may have a sequence of such functions. Controller **204** receives test data generated by sensor **100** through interface **212**, analyzes the data, and determines if

sensor **100** performed according to the specifications using a set of predetermined criteria stored in the controller's memory. If the criteria are satisfied, then sensor **100** is marked for later packaging. If the criteria are not satisfied, then the sensor is marked defective and is usually discarded.

A problem with this approach is that testing on the bare die may not reveal all defective sensors. Unlike many other integrated circuits, integrated image sensors, such as sensor **100**, due to certain specific characteristics, also have to be tested after final assembly. For example, an image sensor should be free of (1) optical obstructions in the photosensitive area and (2) optical system defects, such as microlens defects. These types of defects can be detected only after the chip has been packaged.

To accommodate this requirement, a test procedure may involve multiple testing stages. For example, in a first testing stage, often referred to as prescreening, a fast relatively simple test is performed on an unpackaged sensor, for example, using the testing system of Fig. 2. The sensors that fail the prescreening are discarded, while the sensors that pass the prescreening are packaged. In a second testing stage, a more comprehensive test is performed on each packaged device. As with unpackaged sensors, packaged devices that fail the second testing stage are discarded. This second testing stage is often implemented using a testing system functionally similar to testing system **200** of Fig. 2. However, in this case, the testing system is designed to simulate the operation of the packaged sensor in the final product. Consequently, testing systems for the prescreening and the second testing stage may need different equipment. The expense of building multiple testing systems often precludes (1) the use of several testing systems in parallel to speed up testing and/or (2) the use of duplicate testing systems at separate locations. Lastly, there is a need for testing once the sensor has been incorporated into the final system (e.g., a camera). This kind of test is often the most onerous, since the entire final product has to be placed under test, and the hardest to perform, since the sensor will be at that stage connected to the rest of the circuit and the control and diagnostics software might not yet be built into the final system. A system that can self test, detect errors, and correct such errors is not currently available, and would be of great value to many businesses and industries.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides an integrated system-on-a-chip (SOC) imaging system with built-in diagnostics. According to one implementation of the present invention, an imaging system can be operated in two operating modes: a normal operating mode and a diagnostic mode. While running in the diagnostic mode, the imaging system can be configured to detect manufacturing defects for identifying defective chips. In certain embodiments, the imaging system can be further

configured to compensate for certain types of manufacturing defects. While running in the diagnostic mode, the imaging system (1) identifies pixels that function incorrectly and (2) creates a record of such pixels. In the normal operating mode, the imaging system can use the record to compensate for the missing or incorrect data from these defective pixels during real-time image processing. The present invention simplifies testing of image sensors by providing an SOC image sensor that can be tested one time using a relatively simple testing system as opposed to the relatively complex multi-stage multi-system testing of the prior art. It also increases manufacturing yield by providing compensation for certain types of sensor defects and, therefore, results in lower per-unit manufacturing cost.

10 According to one embodiment, the present invention is an imaging system comprising an image sensor, a memory, and a processor, wherein the image sensor is configured to generate image signals corresponding to an image of a scene; the memory is configured to store image data corresponding to the image signals; and the processor is configured to control operations of the imaging system in a diagnostic mode and in a normal operating mode, wherein, during the diagnostic
15 mode, the processor analyzes the image data to determine if the image sensor is defective.

According to another embodiment, the present invention is a method for fabricating an imaging system comprising the steps of (a) forming an image sensor configured to generate image signals corresponding to an image of a scene; (b) forming a memory configured to store image data corresponding to the image signals; and (c) forming a processor configured to control operations of
20 the imaging system in a diagnostic mode and in a normal operating mode, wherein, during the diagnostic mode, the processor analyzes the image data to determine if the image sensor is defective.

According to yet another embodiment, the present invention is an imaging system comprising an image sensor, a memory, and a processor, wherein the image sensor is configured to generate image signals corresponding to an image of a scene; the memory is configured to store
25 image data corresponding the image signals; and the processor is configured to control operations of the imaging system in a normal operating mode, wherein, during the normal operating mode, the processor processes the image data to compensate for one or more defective pixels in the image sensor.

30 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Other aspects, features, and advantages of the present invention will become more fully apparent from the following detailed description, the appended claims, and the accompanying drawings in which:

Fig. 1 shows a schematic top view of an integrated CMOS image sensor of the prior art;

reference. Sensor **302** comprises an array **402** of photoelements and associated circuitry, such as switches and amplifiers. Each photoelement and its associated circuitry are collectively referred to as a pixel **404**. Each pixel **404** of array **402** has a dedicated analog-to-digital converter (ADC) (not shown). In response to incident light, the photoelement in each pixel generates analog signals, such as current or voltage, representative of the light intensity. These analog signals are converted by the ADC in each pixel of array **402** into a serial bit stream and transferred via a corresponding bit line **406**. ADC outputs are synchronized using a common clock driver **408**. Each clocked bit stream is then processed by filters **410** to derive a digital value representative of the intensity of light incident on the corresponding pixel **404**. Digital values can then be output from sensor **302** to memory **304** of Fig. 3 for storage and further processing via a control circuit **412** and bus **414**.

Referring again to Fig. 3, read-only memory **310** is configured to store internal bootable software. This software comprises normal operating routines and special diagnostic routines. These diagnostic routines simplify test equipment for imaging system **300** since very minimal external support is required to carry out a testing procedure for system **300**. Consequently, a testing system for system **300** can be significantly simpler compared to prior art testing system **200** of Fig. 2.

Fig. 5 shows a schematic block diagram of a testing system **500** that can be used to test imaging system **300** of Fig. 3. Testing system **500** comprises a testing platform **502** having interface **512**, a controller **504**, a power supply **506**, and a stimuli generator **508**. Generator **508** is a calibrated light source similar to generator **208** of testing system **200**. Imaging system **300** (i.e., the DUT) is mounted on platform **502**. Unlike image sensor **100**, which requires different testing system before and after packaging, imaging system **300** can be tested at different stages using a single testing system, such as testing system **500** of Fig. 5. Imaging system **300** can be mounted on testing system **500** using a relatively simple mount, e.g., a surface probe or simple socket. Consequently, platform **502** can have a relatively simple circuit board comprising power contacts and toggles for the pins of imaging system **300**.

Unlike the complex functions of controller **204** of testing system **200** of Fig. 2, controller **504** of testing system **500** has a simplified function of booting imaging system **300** into its diagnostic mode. This can be done by a variety of methods, such as supplying a voltage pattern of logical "0" and/or logical "1" values to one or more package pins of system **300**. After imaging system **300** has been booted in the diagnostic mode, controller **504** communicates with it through interface **512**. According to instructions received from processor **306** of imaging system **300**, controller **504** steps generator **508** through a set of predetermined operations in synchronization with a diagnostic routine executed by processor **306**. Data generated by image sensor **302** during the diagnostic routine are

processed and analyzed by processor **306** using a set of predetermined criteria stored, e.g., in ROM **310**, to generate test results. The test results can be stored on-chip in system **300**, e.g., in register **308**, and/or off-chip, e.g., on a magnetic disk (not shown).

Due to fewer testing stages for testing imaging system **300**, the relative simplicity of testing platform **502**, and the simplified functions of controller **504**, testing system **500** can be relatively simple and inexpensive compared to a typical testing system of the prior art, such as testing system **200** of Fig. 2. This makes it more economical to have multiple testing systems at one location to enable parallel testing of devices or to have such testing systems installed at multiple locations to enable post-manufacturing and/or customer quality control.

Fig. 6 shows a schematic block diagram of an alternative testing system **600** that can be used for testing imaging systems, such as imaging system **300** of Fig. 3. Testing system **600** is similar to testing system **500** of Fig. 5, except that testing system **600** is configured to accommodate a plurality of DUTs, such as imaging system **300**, as opposed to a single DUT for testing system **500**. Testing system **600** is relatively simple because very minimal external support is required to carry out a testing procedure for each individual imaging system **300**. Functions of controller **604** are similar to those of controller **504** of testing system **500**. An additional responsibility of controller **604** compared to controller **504** is to synchronize certain steps in the diagnostic routines executed by each individual processor **306** of each individual imaging system **300** mounted for testing on system **600** with a single stimuli generator **608**. Using testing system **600**, parallel testing of multiple imaging systems, such as imaging system **300**, can be implemented in a relatively simple and inexpensive way.

The manufacturing yield of image sensors, such as sensor **100**, and SOC imaging systems, such as system **300**, is typically correlated to pixel defects. Often, a large array (e.g., 512x512) of pixels in an image sensor or imaging system may have only a few pixels that do not perform according to the specifications. Often, such pixels are isolated, e.g., each defective pixel has neighboring pixels that work properly. In an SOC implementation, an imaging system, such as system **300**, can be configured to compensate for this type of manufacturing defect using the test results generated during the diagnostic routine described above. Similar compensation processing may also be performed for non-SOC systems, including those implemented using prior art image sensors, such as sensor **100** of Fig. 1, that are tested using prior-art testing systems, such as system **200** of Fig. 2. This capability may substantially increase manufacturing yield of both SOC imaging systems and non-SOC image sensors and, thus, lower the per-unit cost.

Fig. 7 shows a flowchart illustrating a method **700** of detecting and compensating for manufacturing defects in an imaging system, such as system **300** of Fig. 3, according to one implementation. In step **702** of method **700**, a packaged SOC imaging system **300** is mounted on a testing system, such as testing system **500** of Fig. 5, and booted in its diagnostic mode. In step **704**,
5 imaging system **300** and testing system **500** are stepped through a diagnostic routine to generate a response pattern of image sensor **302**.

In step **706**, the response pattern is analyzed by processor **306** to identify defective pixels, if any, in image sensor **302**, and the addresses and characteristics of these pixels are recorded for use during subsequent real-time image processing. The recorded characteristics of a defective pixel may
10 include, but are not limited to, the deviation of "dark" counts (in the absence of light) from those in the specification, a fixed offset (positive or negative), a light-intensity-to-digital-counts conversion factor, or the type of defect (e.g., no data or permanent saturation). In one embodiment of step **706** of method **700**, the addresses of the defective pixels can be permanently recorded in register **308** of imaging system **300**. Numerous other techniques can be employed to record the identity of such
15 pixels. For example, in one embodiment, the pixel addresses can be recorded in a programmable read-only memory located on-chip, such as ROM **310** of system **300**. In an alternative embodiment, the pixel addresses can be recorded off-chip, e.g., on a magnetic disk.

In the prior art, following the prescreening, the common practice is to discard defective unpackaged chips having certain types of defects. However, in view of the present invention and
20 depending on the intended application, defective unpackaged chips may be sorted into categories according to the number and distribution of defects. Some categories of the defective unpackaged chips that are deemed correctable may be packaged. According to certain embodiments of the present invention, once the identity and characteristics of defective pixels, if any, have been recorded, in step **708**, the packaged SOC imaging system **300** is configured into a final product (e.g.,
25 a video camera or digital camera). Once the final product is assembled, imaging system **300** can be booted in its normal operating mode in step **710**. In step **712**, image-processing algorithms can use the recorded information about defective pixels during the normal operating mode to compensate for the missing or incorrect data from these pixels. For example, the data for a defective pixel can be approximated using interpolation of image data from the neighboring pixels or using other image-
30 processing techniques. Similar real-time compensation for defective pixels can be implemented even for sensors or imaging systems that are tested using prior-art testing systems, such as system **200** of Fig. 2.

In general, the present invention may be implemented for imaging systems having image sensors with one or more pixels arranged in either a one- or two-dimensional pattern, such as an array of pixels arranged in rows and columns. Photoelements in each pixel may be based on any suitable light-sensitive device, such as, for example, a photodiode, a phototransistor, a photogate, photo-conductor, a charge-coupled device, a charge-transfer device, or a charge-injection device. Similarly, as used in this specification, the term "light" refers to any suitable electromagnetic radiation in any wavelength and is not necessarily limited to visible light.

While this invention has been described with reference to illustrative embodiments, this description is not intended to be construed in a limiting sense. Various modifications of the described embodiments, as well as other embodiments of the invention, which are apparent to persons skilled in the art to which the invention pertains are deemed to lie within the principle and scope of the invention as expressed in the following claims. For example, software enabling the diagnostic mode for an imaging system may be stored off-chip and loaded into the imaging system from the testing system during boot-up.

Although the present invention has been described with reference to digital image sensors and SOC imaging system architecture, it can also be practiced for analog image sensors. For an SOC imaging system with an analog image sensor, the system may also need to include one or more analog-to-digital converters to convert the analog image signals into digital image data for storage in the memory.

Although the steps in the following method claims, if any, are recited in a particular sequence with corresponding labeling, unless the claim recitations otherwise imply a particular sequence for implementing some or all of those steps, those steps are not necessarily intended to be limited to being implemented in that particular sequence.